

(Akusala) Kamma Nidāna Sutta

The Discourse on the (Unwholesome) Causes of Karma¹

[The negative root causes of karma]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.174/5:261 f)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

1 Related teachings

The (Akusala) Kamma Nidāna Sutta (A 10.174) states that when we break any of the moral precepts, we are always motivated by one or more of the three unwholesome roots (*akusala mūla*), that is, greed, hate and delusion.² While the (Akusala) Kamma Nidāna Sutta lists only the unwholesome roots in connection with the ten unwholesome courses of action, the (Kamma) Nidāna Sutta (A 3.33) deals with both the wholesome roots of karma and the unwholesome roots.³ Another similar discourse, with some psychological analysis, is the **Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69).⁴

On a deeper psychological level, these unwholesome roots arise from and are fed by the three kinds of desire, that is, the desire for sense-pleasures (*kāma, taṇhā*), for becoming this and that (*bhava, taṇhā*), or for getting rid of something (*vibhava, taṇhā*).⁵ The roots of each of these desires are very deep and called latent tendencies (*anusaya*), which are basically, lust (*rāga*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), and ignorance (*avijjā*), but one of them is dominant.

When there is a strong **desire** for something we are deluded into thinking that nothing else is important except that desirable object; this is *kāma, taṇhā*, worked up by lust as the dominant latent tendency. As a result of this overpowering desire, we **dislike** thoughts or objects that distract us from our quest; this is *kāma, taṇhā* working with ill will. As a result of all this desiring and questing, we **ignore** anything can really help us; this is the result of *kāma, taṇhā* rooted in ignorance.

Bhava, taṇhā works in a similar way: when we want to *become* something, be it making some money or attaining “eternal life,” the latent tendencies of lust, ill will and ignorance work on our minds in the same way; ignorance is the dominant latent tendency. So, too, in the case of *vibhava, taṇhā*, which arises when, for example, we think we have failed in our quest for happiness; ill will is the dominant latent tendency.

Through proper understanding and keeping the five precepts, we may temporarily suppress greed and hate (but rarely can we act without any delusion, unless we are arhats). However, with some training in mindfulness or meditation, as we begin to understand our selves better, that is, how our minds work, the precepts work better and we have greater self-mastery. In due course, with growing wisdom, our happiness, too grows and deepens.

2 Source of karma

One of the key terms of the Sutta is *kamma, nidāna, sambhava*, which seems to be a hapax legomenon, a term that occurs only once, that is, only in this context. The CPD defines it as “the origin of the cause which is *kamma*,” but also notes a second definition, as a bahuvrihi,⁶ meaning “caused by *kamma*,”

¹ Also called Akusala Hetuka S (The discourse on what is caused by the unwholesome) or Dosa, lobha, moha, hetuka S (The discourse on that which is caused by greed, hate and delusion). Here I follow the title as given in Ce.

² See also **Akusala, mūla S** (A 3.69/1:201-205) = SD 18.2.

³ A 3.33/1:134-136 = SD 4.14.

⁴ A 3.69/1:201-205 = SD 18.2.

⁵ That is, *kāma, taṇhā*, *bhava, taṇhā* and *vibhava, taṇhā*.

⁶ A **bahuvrihi**, is a type of noun compound that refers to something that is not specified by any of its parts by themselves, esp a cpd that refers to a possessor of an object specified: eg, a sabretooth (it is neither a **sabre** nor a **tooth**: it is an extinct feline with huge fangs. English bahuvrihis often describe people by referring to specific properties: *flatfoot*, *half-wit*, *highbrow*, *lowlife*, *redhead*, *tenderfoot*, and *white-collar*.

without any reference nor further comment. Two other occurrences of the term in the Commentaries are mentioned:

- *aṅgāra, kāsu, nidānaṃ dukkhaṃ viya ~aṃ vaṭṭa, dukkhaṃ veditabbam* [“the cause of the arising of karma should be known as the suffering of the samsaric cycle that is like suffering arising from a charcoal pit”] (SA 2:113,3);
- *lobh’ādayo pana ~ā hutvā aṅḍakādibhedā catasso yoniyo upanenti* [“the causes of the arising of karma, being greed and so on, lead to the four kinds births, that is, the egg-born and so on”] (ItA 2:96,20).

Possible translations of the expression *kamma, nidāna, sambhava*, but which I have rejected, are as follows:

- “a producer of kammic concatenation” (A:ÑB 264) is a technical description rather than a definition as it is too free;
- “a coming-to-be of a chain of causal action” (A:W 5:174 f) is close, but awkward, and the translation of *nidāna* as “a chain” is rather free;
- “the cause of the karmic chain” is close, but this too is somewhat too free;
- “the origin of the cause of karma,” which gives the impression there is some sort of primordial or cosmic source from which karma arises.

It is possible to translate *lobho kamma, nidāna, sambhavo* as “greed is born of karmic causes” (and similarly for the other two sentences with *doso* and *moho*), but only part of the sense is conveyed, and as such is a good *word translation* but a poor *sense translation*. The translation I have given here is “condition for the arising of karma.”

There is a similar text on karma, namely, **the Nidānā Sutta** (A 3.33). My own translation is influenced by this Sutta, where I take the *nidāna* of **the (Akusala) Kamma Nidāna Sutta** as synonymous with the *samudaya* of **the Nidānā Sutta** (A 3.33).⁷

3 Buddhism and evil

In the article, “Beyond Good and Evil,” I have discussed at some length, following Martin Southwold’s important study on “Buddhism and Evil” (1985)⁸ that Buddhism does not have the notion of “radical evil.”⁹ This notion is commonly found in demonology and theism, that is, where there is string belief in demons and a creator-God. Such beliefs are usually based on the view that good and evil are distinctly dichotomous, the dividing line between the two is very clear. As regards what constitutes either of them depends on the individual or group that upholds them.

Buddhism does not have any notion of radical evil for the simple reasons that it does not see good and evil as opposing one another as in demon beliefs or the theistic system. Although there is a Buddhist mythology of evil centring around Māra the evil one, he is generally regarded as a symbolic figure or psychological state. Māra is unlike the theistic Devil or Satan, for he is reborn like any other being, and in due course through cultivating the proper qualities, becomes awakened himself.

Most importantly, in Buddhism good and evil are personal mental states, not external realities, as is often the case in the theistic view. In **the (Kamma) Nidāna Sutta**, is given a “soft” definition, that is, in terms of the unwholesome mental states of greed, hate and delusion. They are often called “the roots of the unwholesome” (*akusala, mūla*), in which sense they are “radical” evil, but the sense of which is in direct opposition to its namesake in theistic and demon-centred systems.

The roots of the unwholesome are internal and psychological, while radical evil is external and social. The unwholesome roots are psychological states in all unawakened beings, but which can, indeed should, be worked on so that they are abandoned, or converted into wholesome roots of charity, lovingkindness

⁷ A 3.33/1:134-136 = SD 4.14.

⁸ M Southwold, “Buddhism and evil.” In David Parkin (ed), *The Anthropology of Evil*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985:128-141.

⁹ See **Beyond Good and Evil** = SD 18.7(3).

and wisdom. Radical evil is socially constructed or personally conjured up as a result of social conditions or psychological pathology, usually both. As such, very often, radical evil is itself the root of the system's problems.

Having said all that, it is as such clearly evident and understandable that the Catholic Pope has seriously misrepresented Buddhism when he says that

The “enlightenment” experienced by the Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man.

(“On the Threshold of Hope,” 1994 ch 15)¹⁰

The Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta (A 6.63),¹¹ for example, states that the world is “neutral,” but it is how we react to the world that decides our moral status:

3b There are these five cords of sensual pleasures (*kāma, guṇa*):

Forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful;

Sounds cognizable by the ear that are...delightful;

Smells cognizable by the nose that are...delightful;

Tastes cognizable by the tongue that are...delightful;

Touches cognizable by the body that are desirable, attractive, pleasant, endearing, associated with sensuality, delightful.

—**Monks, these are not sensual objects (*kāma*), but in the noble discipline, they are called “cords of sensual desire” (*kāma, guṇa*).**¹²

The thought of passion is a person's sensuality:

There is no sensuality in what is beautiful (*citra*) in the world.

The thought of passion is a person's sensuality:

What is beautiful in the world remains as they are.

So here the wise remove the desire for them.¹³ (A 6.63.3/3:411)¹⁴

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¹⁰ For Bhikkhu Bodhi's response to John Paul II's article, entitled “Towards a Threshold of Understanding,” see http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/threshold_of_understanding.php.

¹¹ A 6.63/3:410-416 = SD 6.11.

¹² *Api ca kho bhikkhave n'ete kāmā, kāma, guṇā nam'ete ariyassa vinaye vuccanti*. This is an enigmatic statement whose meaning is clarified in the verse that follows. See foll n.

¹³ This verse, which explains the previous prose sentence, “plays upon the double meaning of *kāma*, emphasizes that purification is to be achieved by mastering the defilement of sensuality, not by fleeing [from] sensually enticing objects.” (A:ÑB 1999:302 n34)

¹⁴ An almost identical verse (without line c) is found in **Na Santi S** (S 1.34/1:22). See also **Saññoga S** (A 7.48/4:57-59) = SD 8.7.

The Discourse on the (Unwholesome) Causes of Karma (A 10.174/5:261 f)

1 The destruction of life, bhikshus, is threefold, I say: it is conditioned by greed, or by hate, or by delusion.

The taking of the not given, *too*,...

Sexual misconduct, *too*,...

False speech, *too*,...

Divisive speech, *too*,...

Harsh speech, *too*,...

Frivolous chatter, *too*,...

Covetousness, [262] *too*,...

Ill will, *too*,...

Wrong view, bhikshus, is threefold, I say: it is conditioned by greed, or by hate, or by delusion.

Therefore, bhikshus,

greed is a condition for the arising of karma (*kamma, nidāna, sambhava*);¹⁵

hate is a condition of the arising of karma;

delusion is a condition of the arising of karma.

But when greed is destroyed, there is the end of the arising of karma (*kamma, nidāna, saṅkhaya*);

when hate is destroyed, there is the end of the arising of karma;

when delusion is destroyed, there is the end of the arising of karma.

— evaṃ —

¹⁵ *Kamma, nidānam sambhava* can also be rendered as “born of the karmic chain [cycle],” meaning that the 3 unwholesome roots are further fed by one’s habitual tendencies: see **Sall’atthena S** (S 36.3.7 f/4:208 f) = SD 5.5.

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